



Supporting ex-inmates: A Multifaith guide for communities

Introduction

Many faith traditions understand that it is important to offer hospitality to those who are strangers, refugees, or prisoners. In the 1990's a Southern Ontario Mennonite church welcomed an ex-prisoner into their community and their efforts eventually led to the development of an internationally celebrated program called Circles of Support and Accountability. While this was an exceptional case, there are many positive instances of faith communities receiving released ex-prisoners as members of their congregations, parishes, synagogues and mosques.

A faith community that supports an ex-inmate sends a powerful and hopeful message about the power of redemption. Becoming a member of a faith community helps an ex-inmate reclaim his or her dignity and lets them become known as a mother, father, brother, sister, son, daughter, granddaughter or grandson. Unfortunately, there are gaps that hinder the successful integration of ex-inmates into our faith communities as well as society in general. Ex-inmates may feel uncertain about joining a faith community, find it hard to relate to members of a new tradition, or experience the stigma associated with having been incarcerated. The power of stigma also extends to inmate families who suffer in silence and are often reluctant to share their experiences about a loved one being incarcerated with faith community leaders. Some faith community members may also be fearful about welcoming someone into their community who has been in prison.

Faith Community Re-integration

Closing the gap between ex-prisoners, their families and faith communities interested in offering support is a challenging, but not insurmountable prospect and the Manitoba Multifaith Council encourages faith communities to consider supporting inmates being released from correctional centres in a way that:

- Supports faith communities to self-reflect on their own capacity to support released inmates;
- Strengthens communication with chaplains;
- Networks with other faith communities involved in this service.

Whatever the circumstance facilitating positive relationships, establishing good boundaries and opening important channels of communication increases the likelihood of a better experience for the community and the inmate. Put together in a process, there are distinct stages that focus on critical themes of exploration and connecting - responding.

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Exploration

Exploration focuses on the faith community and its efforts to understand the extent to which there is an interest in being receptive to or supportive of ex-prisoners becoming members of their congregation, mosque, synagogue, temple, etc. This service is not for everyone, but for those who are interested, a careful and a prayerful start is essential. It is also important that a faith community understand it may say no to this sort of service. If for some reason a community is unwilling, unable or unprepared to be actively involved in supporting ex-inmates return to the community then it may say no and be respected for that decision.

Faith communities may face a variety of motivations for being more willing to support ex-inmates. A person being released from prison or their family member may have an historical connection with a particular church, mosque or synagogue. A leader or group within the community may believe in the importance of community re-integration, or a community may find itself in a relationship with and be willing to support someone who is returning to the community after having been in prison. Some persons who have been in prison simply show up to a faith community and never disclose their history of personal circumstances, but are subsequently discovered to have been in custody.

Faith communities that are interested in supporting inmates return to the community need to explore the extent to which they have the capacity to accept this challenge of actively supporting ex-inmates. This should include a process of self-examination about motivations and the extent of support from within. Faith communities are encouraged to reflect on a series of questions that are grouped together in themes. Some questions may be thought provoking, however the intent is not to discourage faith community involvement or present a 'worst case scenario'. By considering a range of issues and possibilities, communities can discover to what extent that they are ready, willing and able to support ex-inmates. How a faith community responds does not become right or wrong, rather it should create a sense of direction as to whether or not to move forward.

As a faith community, consider the following questions and themes:

Understand what motivations and reasons might exist for considering this service.

- *Are there particular factors at work which may be influencing a faith community to become more supportive of ex-inmates, (e.g. a former parishioner or member who is returning home after being incarcerated)?*
- *Is the desire to engage in a service to ex-prisoner widespread amongst several members of the community or is it being promoted by a few?*

Having a safe environment is essential.

- *Does the faith community have protocols or policies intended to promote community safety?*
- *Are volunteers in the community required to have adult and child abuse registry and criminal record checks?*

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- *Do community members understand that, because of the associated risk, ex-inmates should not be provided with personal information, such as place of residence, private phone numbers, emails and other forms of personal (i.e. non-business) communication, nor should contact be initiated through social media?*
- *Is the community aware and accepting that these policies and practices are important?*
- *Is someone in the community designated to hold others accountable to these policies?*

The way a faith community understands itself, its mission and role in the world (locally and globally) is very important.

- *Does the faith community have a 'mission statement' and is it a fit with service to ex-inmates?*
- *What is the approximate size of the faith community? Are members well-connected to the community or are they anonymous? Why might this be important?*
- *How can the socio-economic status of members of the faith community be described? E.g. mostly well off, lower, mixed? Why might this be important?*
- *Has the faith community experienced a negative or traumatic event? (E.g. allegations of abuse against a leader or member, financial mismanagement, denominational split, etc.) If so, will this event impact service to ex-inmates?*
- *Are there physical facility and infrastructure issues that might impact the faith community's capacity to minister to ex-inmates? (E.g. house church, renting space from a school, etc.).*

There are social, cultural and human factors that impact service with ex-inmates and vulnerable groups. Some things to consider.

- *Is the faith community already engaged in social justice type ministries (e.g. food bank or advocacy)?*
- *Does the faith community welcome persons who identify or are members of distinct groups like LGBTQ2, or those struggling with mental health issues?*
- *How well does the faith community deal with conflict (internally and externally)?*
- *How well does the community or members understand some of the social and psychological effects of loss, shame, alienation and criminal justice issues that impact ex-inmates?*
- *Can the faith community deal with people who are intoxicated, dealing with addiction, mental health concerns, etc.*

Relationships with indigenous persons are important.

- *Is the community aware of how indigenous persons are over-represented in the criminal justice system?*
- *Does the faith community currently focus on the cultural and spiritual needs of indigenous persons?*
- *Has the community focused on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report and the various 'Calls to Action'?*

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Has the faith community considered some of the practical issues related to supporting released inmates?

- *Is there a budget for this work and how supportive is the board or leadership council?*
- *Is someone willing to act as a primary contact or coordinator for working with ex-inmates?*
- *Do faith community members currently involve themselves in prison work?*
- *How well connected is the faith community to a chaplain or faith based organization supportive of released inmates?*
- *Do faith community members understand limits when providing support to released inmates?*
- *How willing might faith community members be to visit a local correctional centre of prison?*
- *Is the faith community able to appropriately manage circumstances in which ex-inmates might disclose or share information that others may find beyond the scope of their experience?*
- *Are there members of your church that have been traumatized as a result of violence or through crime?*
- *How might faith community members respond if it were known that a specific member or the community is sex offender?*

There is no formula to follow, nor is there a response to every question. The intent is to consider a greater breadth and depth of issues and concerns that relate to this service. How community members respond to these questions may be an indicator of what direction to take. If that direction moves the community closer to the task of reintegrating ex-inmates into the community then the Manitoba Multifaith Council may be of assistance.

A faith community that wants to move forward is encouraged to contact the Manitoba Multifaith Justice Committee members to share their thoughts and discernment. The next stage of exploration is to meet with a Justice Committee member including a chaplain. The intent at this stage is to create a consensus on the community's overall capacity to welcome released inmates and to identify a responsible individual for follow-up contact. It is important that the selected individual is appropriately mature for the task of establishing a relationship with a person in custody and is able to be cleared as a visitor at a correctional centre.

When the community believes it has sufficiently explored the extent to which it is willing to become involved with supporting ex-inmates after release from a correctional centre, they are asked to share their contact information and a basic profile (e.g. denomination or affiliation, size, available resources, etc.) with the team of chaplains working for Manitoba Community Safety. Chaplains will place the communities' information on a 'living document'. This will help chaplains understand who is available to support inmates being released and how they may be contacted. Information shared with chaplains will not be provided to inmates directly and any contact with inmates will be through a referral process with the community leader's consent.

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Connecting and responding

The next step is for the community to become involved by connecting with someone who most likely is in custody and wants to become part of a faith community. This is where Manitoba Justice Community Safety Division may help. A chaplain, who becomes aware of an inmate wanting support of a faith community, will follow-up with the faith community lead to determine if it is appropriate to encourage a connection. There may be limitations on which inmates will be supported for this initiative and chaplains may consult with other justice officers for their input. There are also limitations on the sort of information that chaplains may disclose to the faith community.

The faith community lead is encouraged to visit the inmate at a correctional centre to make an in person contact and to establish a relationship that is essential to success. People, including ex-inmates, are more likely to positively respond and follow-up when there is a relationship. The purpose of this contact is to build an appropriate relationship prior to release. This means being able to establish appropriate boundaries, clearly communicate expectations

Ideally, the response of the community will evolve over time. Initially it will be important to establish boundaries and create mutually agreeable and realistic expectations that can grow and develop in an atmosphere of safety and trust. With ex-inmates, that may mean a focus on the present rather than the past.

For example:

- The nature of support offered ought to be consistent with the community's capacity.
- Expectations of financial support, loans, or material gifts are warning signs that there may be an exploitative dimension to the relationship.
- Sharing personal contact information, extending invitations to visit at home or to visit socially ought to be discouraged.

The extent to which an ex-inmate may remain a part of the community may vary. Some may want short-term support while others may become long-term members. Whatever the circumstance, focus on the present, remain hopeful and be guided by common sense.

Conclusion

Most faith communities welcome and encourage new members to visit their places of worship and participate in the life of their community. Many might be surprised to learn that ex-inmates may already be attendees and participants in our houses of worship and prayer. The challenge presented herein is to extend that invitation and overcome the stigma when one is known to have involvement in the criminal justice system. To do so in an appropriate manner that encourages communication and safety is the challenge to which faith communities are invited.

Ready to begin? Please reach out the MMC Justice Committee at mmcjusticecommittee@gmail.com